

Expanding mobility through MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program

An annual competitive funding opportunity supporting transportation for older adults and people with disabilities in Massachusetts

November 2021

Older adults, people with disabilities, and other Massachusetts residents need reliable, affordable transportation options to access healthcare, jobs, education, nutrition, and recreational and social activities. Access to transportation is a social determinant of health. Transportation enables people to avoid the detrimental effects of isolation and facilitates other social determinants of health, contributing to individual and community wellbeing.

Transit authorities, municipalities, and nonprofits interested in expanding mobility in Massachusetts have the opportunity to apply to MassDOT's annual Community Transit Grant Program to access state and federal funds. Strong applications respond to and address a local or regional unmet transportation need, coordinate with partners across sectors and avoid duplicating existing services, include riders in project planning and design, and prioritize transportation for older adults and people with disabilities while offering unused seats to the general public.

Overview of the Community Transit Grant Program

For the most up-to-date information on MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program, visit www.mass.gov/community-transit-grant-program or contact the Manager of Grant Programs in MassDOT's Rail and Transit Department.

MassDOT disburses state Mobility Assistance Program and Federal Transit Administration Section 5310 funding through the Community Transit Grant Program. Municipalities (including Councils on Aging), transit authorities, and nonprofits are eligible to apply. All projects must:

- Complement and increase the existing transportation network by expanding mobility above and beyond what is available through public transit and ADA paratransit¹ in a region
- Prioritize older adults and/or people with disabilities, though the general public can also ride if space allows
- Focus on transporting people, not goods, though some delivery can occur if the schedule allows²
- Reflect community needs as listed in your region's Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan³

Eligible expenses can fall into one of three categories:

- Capital expenses – includes wheelchair-accessible vehicles⁴ and technology

¹ ADA paratransit refers to the origin-to-destination service that transit authorities are legally required to provide to eligible individuals with disabilities who are traveling within ¾ of a mile of a fixed route, under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. For example, the MBTA offers THE RIDE as its ADA paratransit service.

² If you are planning to transport goods, you must check with MassDOT before submitting an application to make sure your plan fulfills federal guidelines. All grantees must prioritize passenger transportation and can only offer delivery as an incidental service.

³ Contact your Regional Planning Agency to get the most recent version of your plan. Most plans are also posted online at www.mass.gov/info-details/community-transportation-coordination#local-tools:-coordinated-human-service-transportation-plans-

- Mobility management expenses – activities to help coordinate transportation services, activities to help riders navigate mobility options (including travel training), and planning grants
- Operating expenses – running or supporting a transportation option that fills an unmet need or encourages use of public transit

With the exception of Regional Transit Authorities⁵ applying for vehicles, all applicants must pay a local match. For capital and mobility management projects, the grant can cover up to 80 percent of the total project cost; for operating projects, the grant can cover up to 50 percent of the total project cost. Generally, organizations use funding from a different (non-MassDOT) grant or from their general operating budget as match.⁶ Fare revenue is not eligible to count towards the local match.

Since applications received may exceed the total amount of funding, MassDOT cannot guarantee that all eligible projects will be funded. If a project does receive a grant, MassDOT does not guarantee that it will be funded again in future years and encourages applicants and grantees to look for alternate funding sources and plan for sustainability if grant funding is not renewed. To increase the likelihood of receiving funding, applicants should incorporate best practices and ensure that their projects:

- Respond to unmet local or regional transportation need
- Coordinate with partners across sectors to build on – not duplicate – existing transportation options
- Include riders in project planning, design, implementation, and evaluation
- Prioritize transportation for older adults and people with disabilities while offering unused seats to the general public – while this grant funding focuses on older adults and people with disabilities, where capacity allows, grantees are encouraged to open available seats to other riders in order to avoid segregation and increase mobility for all community members

Examples of projects funded through the Community Transit Grant Program

Over the years, MassDOT has funded many innovative and effective projects through the Community Transit Grant Program.⁷ In this report, we highlight three past grantees that each incorporated many best practices into their work and together exemplify the range of activities eligible for funding.

Mobility management planning grant

The Blue Hills Community Health Alliance is the Community Health Network Area (CHNA)⁸ serving Quincy and 12 other South Shore communities. In 2018, noting that lack of access to transportation had emerged as a barrier in the most recent round of hospital Community Health Improvement Plans – and

⁴ Applicants choose from a menu of options. The vehicles are procured by MassDOT and delivered the following summer or fall, so it can be over a year between when the application is submitted and when the vehicle becomes available.

⁵ Councils on Aging in municipalities that are members of Regional Transit Authorities may be able to apply for vehicles under the auspices of their transit authority and thus avoid paying local match.

⁶ If you are interested in using an in-kind match, you must contact MassDOT before submitting your application to check whether your match is eligible.

⁷ Complete listings of grantees by fiscal year are available online at www.mass.gov/community-transit-grant-program/resources.

⁸ CHNAs are coalitions that bring public and private sector partners together to promote health and healthy communities: www.mass.gov/service-details/community-health-network-areas-chna-configuration

recognizing the role transportation plays as a social determinant of health – the CHNA’s steering committee decided it wanted to pursue an action-oriented transportation project. CHNA staff ascertained that their region did not have a Regional Coordinating Council (RCC)⁹ on Community Transportation, and so in early 2019, they established one for their region to bring community organizations together to discuss transportation challenges and opportunities and collaborate on improving mobility for older adults, people with disabilities, and other community members. The CHNA sees itself as a convener, but also wanted the meetings to be action-oriented, so they developed a workplan. They would start by conducting a needs assessment looking at transportation barriers in the region, then develop an action plan to address those barriers, pilot implementation in a few communities, and finally expand their programming throughout the region. They applied for and received a Community Transit Grant to fund some of their time convening partners and working on the workplan.

Engaging the community – both organizational partners and riders – was an important component of the CHNA’s planning process. They began with one-on-one conversations with agency partners to learn about transportation barriers their clients were facing. These conversations also offered the CHNA a chance to learn about and align with any related initiatives agency partners were already working on, as well as to build the trust and credibility that allowed the project to progress. The CHNA also interacted directly with community residents through attending public events, such as the Quincy Moon Festival, where they engaged residents in interactive activities such as having community members choose between wooden chips with a sad face, indifferent face, or happy face to rank their experience with different modes of travel. The CHNA also included more formal engagement in their needs assessment through community forums and resident focus groups, which were organized through the CHNA’s partnerships with community agencies. Once the action plan was drafted, they returned to the community to see what resonated and gather residents’ reactions.

- For more information about the CHNA’s transportation efforts, visit www.bluehillsrcc.org.

Mobility management grant supporting travel instruction

In order to expand mobility for older adults in their region and also manage demand for paratransit services, the Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MVRTA) applied for a grant to develop videos to show people how to ride the system’s fixed-route buses. “We wanted to find a mechanism to teach people how to ride the fixed route and show them how easy it is, and make those tools accessible to our Councils on Aging so they could make those tools available anytime they needed to teach about riding,” explained MVRTA Deputy Administrator Kathleen Lambert. The idea for the video originated a few years prior in the Merrimack Valley Regional Coordinating Council. Initially, MVRTA partnered with a local Council on Aging to film a video in a municipal community access TV station. However, the project grew too big for partners to do as a side project, leading MVRTA to apply for grant funds. The Community Transit Grant funding provided a portion of the cost to develop the videos, with other grants covering the balance.

MVRTA wanted to make sure the videos reflected the local population and responded to potential riders’ needs, so they reached out to community-based partner organizations for assistance convening a

⁹ For more information about Regional Coordinating Councils in Massachusetts, visit www.mass.gov/info-details/regional-coordinating-councils-for-community-transportation

series of focus groups. A professional facilitator led one- to two-hour discussions with groups of seniors, bus riders, and students. Focus groups were representative of the region's population, including community members with a range of disabilities and participants from local Chinese, Vietnamese, and Latino communities. To facilitate participation, MVRTA offered free rides to and from the focus groups. The themes that emerged from the focus groups formed the basis for the focus areas and scripts that the production team developed for the videos, but MVRTA made sure the final version also incorporated suggestions from drivers and the MVRTA Safety Officer. Once the scripts were finalized, MVRTA reached back out to the focus group participants and invited them to serve as the actors. MVRTA developed five videos on etiquette, schedules, paying the fare, getting on and off, and accessibility, and had each video translated into four languages, with a native speaker introducing each. "We really wanted the videos to be relatable and to reflect the community. It's not only a tool to help people understand how to ride, it's also a marketing tool for the agency," emphasized Lambert.

- MVRTA's videos are available on their website at www.mvrta.com/how-to-ride.

Other approaches to supporting travel instruction

While MVRTA opted to use the grant funding to support videos, Community Transit Grant funds can also support travel trainer salaries or other expenses related to providing travel instruction. For example, the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority, MetroWest Regional Transit Authority, and Pioneer Valley Transit Authority have supported their travel instruction programs in part through funding from the Community Transit Grant Program.

- Best practice: in order to coordinate services and avoid duplication, any nonprofit or municipal applicant seeking funding to support travel instruction should seek to partner with their transit authority or secure a letter of support from their transit authority.

Operating funds

The Town of Ware, working closely with the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVDC) applied for and received operating funds from the Community Transit Grant Program to operate the Quaboag Connector,¹⁰ a transportation service in Ware and eight surrounding communities. Located in between the service areas of two Regional Transit Authorities and at the intersection of three counties, the region offered extremely limited transportation options prior to the Connector's launch. In the ten years leading up to the launch of the Connector, lack of transportation frequently emerged as a barrier preventing individuals from overcoming poverty and constraining regional economic development. Lack of transportation meant that high school graduates could not access higher education opportunities, unemployed individuals could not get jobs, residents could not access medical care, and older adults were isolated. In 2013, a Community Investment Plan identified lack of transportation as a significant barrier, and QVDC stepped up to address it. Gathering an impressive array of partners – including the superintendent of the local school system, municipal planners and Town Administrators from partnering towns, local social service organizations and housing authorities, and the local healthcare system – QVDC and the Town of Ware were able to secure public and private funding to launch a demand-response transportation option in 2017.

¹⁰ Learn more about the Quaboag Connector's current operations at www.rideconnector.org

The Town owns the vehicles and employs the drivers, making use of the insurance and maintenance they already had access to for other Town vehicles, while QVDC built on their strength of serving community members to fulfill the rider-facing components: answering calls and scheduling rides. Riders call in advance to reserve a ride. Within the nine-town service area, the Connector picks riders up at their home (or wherever they wish to start their trip) and takes them to their destination. Older adults and people with disabilities receive priority, but the general public can also ride as space allows.

As the Connector moved from an idea to a reality, QVDC continued to engage partner organizations through an advisory group, which morphed into a Regional Coordinating Council. They developed strong relationships with the Regional Transit Authorities to the west and to the east, as well as with state partners. Over time, they have worked hard to engage additional local partners while also maintaining their long-standing relationships with the original collaborators. In addition, they began monthly meetings with drivers to hear their feedback and suggestions.

QVDC has also engaged community members and riders. Before launching, they surveyed community members both to gather data around the need and also as an early marketing strategy to get residents thinking about transportation. In addition to a traditional survey, they attended community events to have informal conversations where residents gather organically. Through these longer conversations, they found a higher level of need: with some probing questions, residents who initially said they did not have transportation problems would realize that reliable public transportation would work better for them than patching rides together from family members. After launching the Connector, QVDC recruited riders to join the advisory board, providing them free rides to in-person meetings and a stipend for their time.

Operating grants can cover up to 50 percent of the total project cost, so QVDC and the Town of Ware have been creative about leveraging other funding to make up the remaining 50 percent. The Connector has received funding through the local healthcare system, private foundations such as the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts and local foundations, and other sources. In addition, certified Community Development Corporations like QVDC are eligible to offer community investment tax credits, which offer donors a fully-refundable state tax credit for their donation – decreasing the total cost of the donation for the donor.

Capital expenses

While this report focuses on examples of mobility management and operating projects, the Community Transit Grant Program can also fund capital expenses such as acquisition of wheelchair-accessible vehicles or certain technological upgrades. For example, the Quaboag Connector has partnered with the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority to apply for vehicles as well as scheduling software. To be eligible for funding through the Community Transit Grant Program, capital expenses should be directly related to expanding mobility for older adults and people with disabilities.

Incorporating best practices

While the CHNA, MVRTA, and QVDC projects differ from each other in many ways, all three incorporated four best practices:

1. Respond to and address a local or regional unmet transportation need
2. Coordinate with partners across sectors to build on – not duplicate – existing transportation options



3. Include riders in project planning, design, implementation, and evaluation
4. Prioritize transportation for older adults and people with disabilities while offering unused seats to the general public – while this grant funding focuses on older adults and people with disabilities, where capacity allows, grantees are encouraged to open available seats to other riders in order to avoid segregation and increase mobility for all community members

Each project integrated these best practices in a way that fit the project goals and reflected the regional environment. Please refer to the table in the appendix for details.

Next steps for potential applicants

If you are interested in applying for a Community Transit Grant to expand mobility for older adults and people with disabilities in your region, start early! Laying the groundwork ahead of time will help you have a strong application. Taking the following steps before you apply will help you develop a strong application and successful project.

Familiarize yourself with the Community Transit Grant Program website

Visit www.mass.gov/community-transit-grant-program for details on what eligible applicants and expenses, lists of past grantees, and key dates and deadlines.

Connect with state partners

Introduce yourself to MassDOT's Manager of Grant Programs and let them know you are thinking about applying. They can answer any questions you have about eligibility or local match requirements, and can also connect you with potential partners or past grantees doing similar work. You can find the Manager of Grant Programs' contact information on MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program webpage.

In addition, reach out to MassMobility. MassMobility is a small initiative within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services that supports any effort to expand mobility for older adults or people with disabilities. MassMobility can also help you connect with potential partners or organizations in other regions that have implemented programs similar to your idea so you can learn from their experience and develop a strong proposal. Contact hstmobility@mass.gov to connect with MassMobility.

Refine your idea and connect with local partners

What type of project will best support your region's transportation needs? Check out these resources to learn about creative approaches taken in Massachusetts and across the country:

- MassMobility webpage sharing tools and strategies to help human service agencies address transportation challenges: www.mass.gov/human-service-agencies-and-community-transportation
- Video and supplemental links highlighting creative strategies aging and disability services organizations can use to expand mobility www.mass.gov/info-details/staff-training-creative-approaches-to-expand-community-mobility
- Stay up to date on new developments in community transportation in Massachusetts through the MassMobility newsletter www.mass.gov/massmobility-newsletter
- National examples and resources <https://nationalcenterformobilitymanagement.org/>

Whether your idea is original or adapted from another organization or region, make sure it responds to local needs, builds on local resources, and does not duplicate existing service. Reach out to organizations you already partner with, and introduce yourself to new potential partners to learn about what they



may offer and refine your plan as appropriate. Reach out to the contact for your region's Regional Coordinating Council to see if the Council is still meeting and if so, join the email list or attend an upcoming meeting to connect with others interested in community transportation in your area. If your outreach does not already include older adults and people with disabilities directly, connect with local advocacy groups and community-based organizations to bring in riders' voices.

- Look up your region in Ride Match to learn about other mobility options you may not be aware of and to make sure any transportation services you operate are listed: www.massridematch.org
- Find contact information for your area's Regional Coordinating Council at www.mass.gov/info-details/regional-coordinating-councils-for-community-transportation
- Learn about inclusive planning through the national Transit Planning for All initiative <https://transitplanning4all.org/>

Identify local match funding

Whatever the total cost of your project, the Community Transit Grant Program can provide up to half for an operating request, or 80 percent for capital or mobility management. The projects highlighted in this report utilized a variety of sources for the required local match. The CHNA and MVRTA each used funds from their general operating budgets, while QVDC and the Town of Ware leveraged funding from multiple sources, including participating towns and a local hospital. Identify what source(s) of funding you can use for the local match. Leveraging additional funding streams can also help sustain your program over the long term.

- Find potential funding opportunities at www.mass.gov/info-details/funding-for-community-transportation
- Reach out to MassDOT's Manager of Grant Programs to double check that your local match funding source is eligible under the state and federal guidelines.

Get ready to apply

Prior to opening the online application form, MassDOT holds training sessions each year. Required for new applicants and optional for returning applicants, the sessions review eligibility criteria and grant requirements as well as introduce the online application system. Check MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program webpage for information about the training sessions and the application schedule.

- A best practice is to begin your application early, so you have plenty of time to reach out to MassDOT's Manager of Grant Programs if you run into any difficulty or have questions along the way.

Conclusion

Thank you for your interest in expanding mobility for older adults and people with disabilities in Massachusetts! Through working together and leveraging resources like MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program, we can reduce senior isolation; assist older adults in aging in community; facilitate independence and community living for people with disabilities; and build healthy, vibrant, and livable communities for all Massachusetts residents.



Contact Information

For more information about the Massachusetts Community Transit Grant Program, contact Jenna Henning at jennifer.n.henning@dot.state.ma.us.

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Reference

Jenna Henning and Rachel Fichtenbaum. (2021). Expanding Mobility through MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program. Co-authored by MassDOT's Rail and Transit division and MassMobility, an initiative of the Executive Office of Health and Human Service.



Appendix - Community Transit Grant Program Example Projects and Best Practices

	Respond to an unmet transportation need	Coordinate with partners across sectors	Include riders in project planning and design	Prioritize transportation for older adults and people with disabilities while offering unused seats to general public
Blue Hills Community Health Alliance <i>Mobility management planning grant to identify & address regional transportation gaps</i>	Transportation barrier emerged in the Community Health Improvement Plans	Partnered with over 20 local agencies representing municipalities, healthcare, a homeless shelter, and community-based organizations	Included a range of community engagement strategies at all phases of the workplan	Coalition included Councils on Aging but also other groups like the Quincy Asian Resources, Inc.
Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority <i>Mobility management grant to promote use of fixed-route bus and expand travel training capacity through developing videos</i>	Regional Coordinating Council had identified need for videos showing people how to ride the bus	Partnered with community agencies to recruit participants to focus groups	Insights from focus groups of riders and potential riders formed the basis for the video topics and scripts. Focus group participants invited to serve as actors in the videos	Focus groups included older adults and people with disabilities as well as bus riders and members of the local Chinese, Vietnamese, and Latino communities. Videos were developed for Councils on Aging but are also on the MVRTA website for anyone to access and use
Quaboag Connector <i>Operating grant to provide transportation in an area with extremely limited public and private transportation</i>	Lack of transportation emerged repeatedly in informal conversations and surfaced as a priority in a 2013 Community Investment Plan	Partnered with a wide range of local municipal officials and planners, school systems, healthcare system, Councils on Aging and Senior Centers, and social service agencies	In the planning phase, conducted a survey and attended community events to meet people where they were and have longer conversations. During implementation, paid riders a stipend and provided rides to attend advisory group meetings and host monthly meetings with drivers to gather their insights	Older adults and people with disabilities receive priority, but seats are open to the general public as capacity allows